

QUILTS OF GEE'S BEND | MOVEMENT CHILDREN | CLASSICAL, WITH A TWIST | DESEGREGATING TV

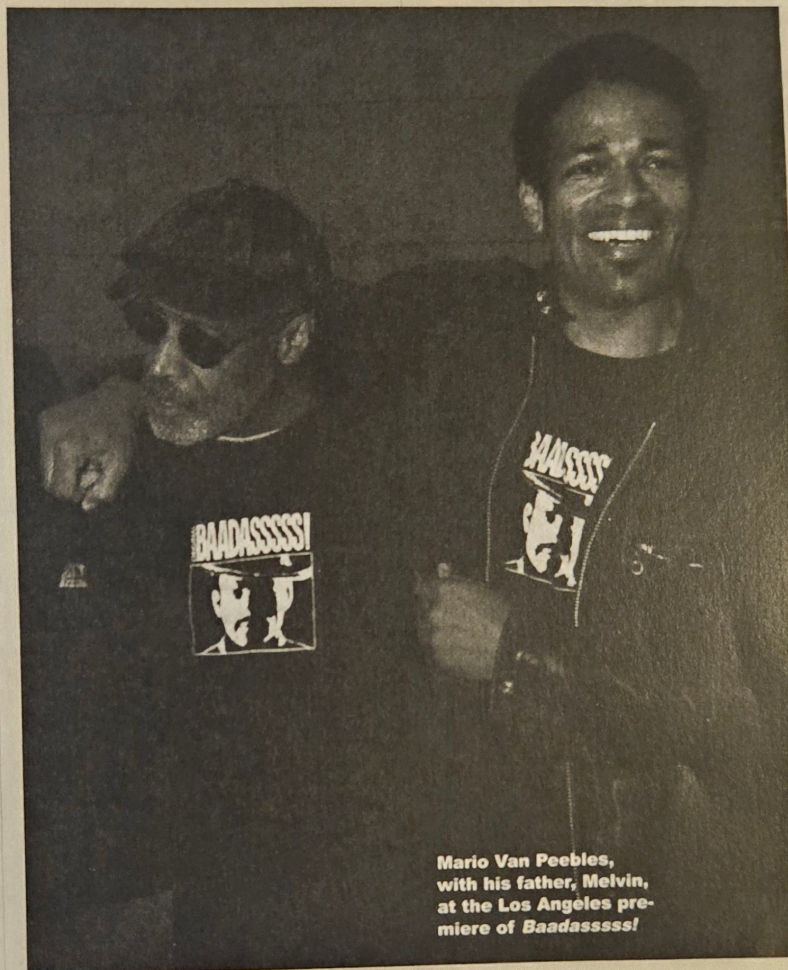
film

Like Father, Like Son: The Making of a Milestone

Before *Shaft* or *Superfly* there was *Sweetback*, the big screen's first Black ghetto hero and star of Melvin Van Peebles' groundbreaking 1971 film, *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song*. The movie didn't just open the door for films about strong Black characters, it kicked it down. Blaxploitation was born soon after. While the genre was not embraced by some Blacks, the flicks produced a long line of butt-kicking heroes and heroines and, at least briefly, opened up new behind-the-scenes opportunities for African American writers, directors and crew members.

Mario Van Peebles, Melvin's son, directs and stars as his father in *Baadasssss!*, the story behind *Sweetback*. Van Peebles tells how his father was determined to make a bold new type of film that the Hollywood establishment had never seen. Van Peebles has a small, but controversial, role in his father's film where viewers see the then 13-year-old playing young Sweetback as he loses his virginity to a prostitute. The movie follows Sweetback as he goes on the run after killing two racist White policemen who beat up a young Black man they had arrested.

The process of making *Sweetback* was harrowing: Melvin Van Peebles tries unsuccessfully to raise funds before deciding to pay for the movie himself, with some help from Bill Cosby. He avoids using union labor he can't afford under the guise of creating a pornographic film, which the unions didn't get involved in. He assembles an inexperienced, multi-racial ragtag crew and struggles to finish the film despite having no real budget and facing countless obstacles. *Sweetback* ulti-



Mario Van Peebles, with his father, Melvin, at the Los Angeles premiere of *Baadasssss!*

interview by Rhonda Stewart

mately receives an X rating, keeping it out of virtually every theater in America.

In the end, the distributor could persuade only two movie houses — one in Detroit, the other in Atlanta — to show the film. The few people who showed up for the Detroit premiere walked out before it ended. But word of the guerrilla effort spread. Shows began to sell out and *Sweetback* soon opened in additional theaters. Eventually, it became the country's top grossing film in mid-May 1971.

Mario Van Peebles, 47, spoke to *The Crisis* in a telephone interview about the significance of his new film on the making of his father's classic:

THE CRISIS: Why was it important for you to make *Baadasssss!*?

MARIO VAN PEEBLES: I felt that history is a book written by the winner. As you look back at the history of film, you realize how quickly, like anything else, our history can be co-opted. In this particular bit of American history, this guy, Melvin Van Peebles, had an impossible dream to make an impossible film with an impossible crew. I thought what an important, tragic, funny, inspiring American story it was.

I felt this was a bit of history where I was there and I knew the real story. And I thought the conditions under which my dad made this film, to some extent, are

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starting to circle back with the gains in civil rights being slowly eroded away. We're coming back to a place where we have to just basically do for self. I wanted to show not only can we play ball, but we can own the team.

In the film you, in the role of your dad, say you wanted the film to star the community, or "all the faces Norman Rockwell never painted." Why did he want to use a multiracial crew?

It was almost like he was saying we can learn to live and work together on this film. It was about being pissed off at the "isms" — racism, sexism, genderism or what have you, but not being pissed off at people. That's the biggest thing, his humanity. When I'm in charge, when he's in charge, we'll do better by them than they've done by us. It's not just a Black-White issue. The effect of us being an all-Black crew or just sitting at our own lunch table is not as powerful as us going outside our comfort zone and learning from them, too.

This is much more than a "making of" film. What did you want to capture in showing the process of your dad's struggle to make Sweetback?

"Melvin Van Peebles had an impossible dream to make an impossible film with an impossible crew."

When my father first saw the movie it was in Toronto, and there were 600 people there and we got a standing ovation. I said, "What'd you think?" and he said, "Man this...is *Seabiscuit* on two legs," which means it's about struggle on a human level. What people are talking about and why they're seeing this movie is because it's about human struggle, the human heart, conflict between father and son and David versus Goliath.

Early in Baadasssss!, your dad has just finished making Watermelon Man [a comedy about a bigoted White man who one day wakes up Black] and has a three-picture deal with a major studio. He's encouraged to write a new film that will have broad appeal and will make lots of money, but that's not what he's interested in doing. Why is it so important for Black directors to have freedom to do different types of films and the kinds of films they're passionate about?

Five years ago, I had a dinner at my house and I invited a bunch of cats over. It was John Singleton, Reggie Hudlin, Vondie Curtis-Hall. We talked and started playing dozens and cracking on each other. Next thing, it got quiet and I said, "Wow, look at us, man. None of us have spent time behind bars. None of us have been on crack." Most of us went to college. We knew our dads. We knew our moms. And there weren't any films that reflected our experience.

We were being told if you want to have complex, adult, educated characters, make them White. But we don't want to be confined to any cinematic ghetto. At the same time, if we want to make films about people of color, we can only make films about guys with baggy pants talking loud. We have to jiggle it up, minstrel it up. If we're willing to jump up and down and say, "Show me the money!" then they'll fund you. If you're willing to clown, they'll fund you.

I don't have a problem with hip-hop comedies per se. The problem is when you get a lack of spectrum. White people get *A Beautiful Mind*. We don't have *A Beautiful Mind*. White people get *Lost in Translation*. We don't get *Lost in Translation*. White people get *Good Will Hunting*. I took that as a challenge to make a film that was real and that showed us as political and sexy and flawed and human. I just told the truth.

You've said your dad is many things at once — a renaissance man, hustler, revolutionary, wise old sage, player, father, grandfather, friend, comrade, dramatist. Was it important that Baadasssss! not only tell the story behind Sweetback but give your father his due as an artist?

That's nice, but that's not why I made the film. When hip-hoppers saw this movie, they came out like they'd gotten a shot in the arm. This is the first movie, in a way, that shows a brother who is an intellectual who is still cool. It's important to us as a people because it shows us a way out of any situation we want to change. I'm not waiting with my hand out. I'm not going to complain about that darkness. I'm going to turn on the light.

The biggest element for me was we need to see the possibility of a cool, real brother who made a difference in history. A lot of our heroes got shot down or beat down. Melvin Van Peebles walked away. That's a hero. He changed the game.

Rhonda Stewart is a reporter at *The Boston Globe*.